The Influence of Latin in the English Language and the Romanization of Great Britain


1. INTRODUCTION

While studying English some students realises that a high number of words they learn are very similar to Spanish words. These words are called cognates, that is to say, some words in English are similar to words in Spanish or Catalan and have the same meaning. It is a good opportunity to explain students the Roman conquest and the Romanization of Great Britain and the influence of Latin in the English language.

In this article, the Roman conquest and its ending in the Romanization of Great Britain will be summarized. The influence of Latin during the three periods in which the English Language is divided and we will study some Latin borrowings and calques that entered into English during these periods.

2. THE ROMAN CONQUEST

Celtic settlements in Britain resulted from successive cultural waves during the fifth, third and first centuries BC, emanating from Northern France.

To the Romans, Britain was an outpost of the Empire, a province to be subdued and governed by military power and inevitably exploited. Julius Caesar realized the necessity of extending the Atlantic frontier of Rome’s dominion to Britain; for its Gaulish inhabitants were in constant league with rebellious forces on the Continent. He invaded Britain in 55 BC, but the expansion of the Roman Empire was at August time predominantly eastward.

It was not until Emperor Claudius in 43 AD that the conquest of the island was decided. He conquered the island with an army of 40,000 men. Little by little, the frontier was pushed under the different Roman Governors like Julius Agricola who enlarged the frontier as far as the Solway firth and the Tyne river. It stayed under the limits of what may be considered present England, helped by the building of a stonewall (Hadrian’s Wall) which represented the Western frontier of Romanization.

After the military invasion and conquest, Romanization came. It began by the replacement of the former political leaders by Roman Governors and the settlement of a Roman population who mixed with the native population.

The conquered territories were organised and given the rank of province. So, distant territories were adopted, by force first, by political organization later and by cultural influence at last.

This generated a bountiful commerce which, together with its offspring communication is one of the keystones of Roman civilization. The communication between people was effectuated in Latin, the language of Romans which was introduced as the official language.
The success of Latin represented the success of the process of Romanization together with the adoption of Roman ways of life like the construction of highways and road, heating apparatus and water supply, the foundation of cities, baths, temples, villas and the general use of Roman dresses and ornaments (as it can be seen in the city of Bath). But this success was only partial as most of the population who lived in the country still spoke Celt.

Romans had already left the island when the Teutonic invasion took place in the 5th C. Teutons were called by the Celts to help them against the Picts and Scots but it was the Teutons in the end those who conquered and subjugated the Celts.

The language of these Teutonic tribes that invaded Britain is known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon. On the following section, the influence of Latin in Old English and the other periods of English Language are going to be dealt with.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF LATIN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The history of English Language can be divided into three periods: Old English, Middle English and Modern English. We are going to explain its own characteristics and the effects of the introduction of loans, borrowings and calques of other languages.

3.1 Old English (449-1100)

According to the English professor Albert Baugh, there are three distinct periods when Latin entered the English language:

- Zero period or continental period.
- First period.
- Second period.

3.1.1. Zero Period or continental period

For several hundred years, the Germans before occupying England, had commercial contacts with the Romans, so Latin words entered the Celtic language in this period (about 170 lexical items). Words related specially to trade and everyday life were introduced: Camp(battle), Weall(wall), Cheap(bargain, cheap), Pund(pound), Winn(wine)...

3.1.2. First Period

What was the language situation when the English reached in Britain? In the first half of the 5th C Latin was still the official language of Britain.

For everyday purposes, ordinary people used British which was still a single language. In the second half of the 5th C and during the 6th C Latin survived chiefly among the upper classes and rulers of the Highland zone.

It is not clear how far the early English loans from Latin represent direct borrowings from Latin-speaking Britons; how far they are words which have passed through British to enter Old English or how far they are continental loans. For instance, ancor “anchor”, oele “oil”, forca “fork”.

Mixed population invariably produced hybridization of speech as for example failure to recognize the quantity of long vowels, levelling of genders, the nasal consonant n, loss of inflexions...

3.1.3. Second Period or Christianity Period

The reintroduction of Latin was effected through the influence of Christianity. St. Augustine was sent with the mission to convert Britain into Christianity. With the help of the King’s wife, he converted the king and many lords. Besides, the first church was built in Canterbury and St. Augustine became his first archbishop.

A century before, St. Patrick had Christianized Ireland and founded several monasteries. These monasteries held the cultural and religious leadership in Britain for centuries.

Therefore, the Latin alphabet was introduced, religious works were written in Latin as well as in Old English and Celtic. The semantic fields in which Latin had a major influence were: religion, church organization, education, learning and domestic life. For example: alms, altar, deacon, hymn, minister, master, grammatical...

However, the Latin influence on Old English stopped momentarily at the end of the 8th C when the Danes (or Vikings as the English called them) began to sack churches and monasteries. As a consequence, church declined as well as education.

King Alfred restored churches, founded new monasteries and spread education. His work was continued by three archbishops who carried into England the Benedictine Reform. It implied the improvement of education, the establishment of school in monasteries and the encouraging of learning among the clergy and the monks.

The linguistic effects of the reform were the introduction of more and more Latin loans and borrowings into the written language like demon; paper (papyrus); cucumber (cucumber).

Most of the loans were nouns as the adjectives and verbs followed Old English word-formation patterns. By the end of the Old English period around 450 words were Latin borrowings and 300 of them passed onto general vocabulary.

3.2 INFLUENCE OF LATIN IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH

Latin does not stop at the end of the Old English period. Together with French, it had a revival after the Norman Conquest, in the formative period of Middle English.

English borrowed through French which was the language of nobility, law and court. Latin continued to be the language of intellectuals, doctors and investigators. Latin words were also borrowed but they came from ecclesiastical or legal texts.

Besides vocabulary, Latin popularized prefixes (dis-, re-, sub-, pre-...) and suffixes (-able, -ible, -ent, -al...)

Another hallmark in this period is the existence of the three level synonyms: rise-mount-ascent, ask-question-interrogate being the English word the most popular, the French word the most literary and the Latin one, the most learnt.
3.3 INFLUENCE OF LATIN IN THE MODERN ENGLISH

During Renaissance, there was a great interest in vernacular languages in the Classical world which produced the popularization of works that had been available only to academic men.

Classical works were translated into English and translators did not only translate but they created a literary English language. In some cases, there was a lack of vocabulary in English but instead of borrowing foreign words, they were now “anglicized”. For example, they cut the end of the word (consult-are), or they changed the ending (extern-us—external), or they formed verbs from Latin past participle (exterminate)...

But above all, the main characteristic of this period is that Latin borrowings are specially adopted to international vocabulary of science.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, English language is a Germanic dialect transformed by Latin and Romance languages. Latin influence began in Britain before the English civilization appeared. It was brought by the Roman Empire when Britain was inhabited by the Celts.

The English language was greatly influenced by Latin. English vocabulary is made up of at least 30% of words derived from Latin and since the main difficulty in learning a foreign language is its unfamiliarity, this problem is partially solved as Latin is a common root of Spanish language. Therefore, students may know deduce the meaning of words that have a Latin origin and make the learning of English easy. The difficulty in learning English turns then to pronunciation and spelling.

Bibliografía

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